

2006

Chapter Five: At the Service of the Poor of the Mouffetard District

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/rendu>

Recommended Citation

Chapter Five: At the Service of the Poor of the Mouffetard District.
<https://via.library.depaul.edu/rendu/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Studies Institute Monographs & Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rosalie Rendu by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

CHAPTER V

AT THE SERVICE OF THE POOR OF THE MOUFFETARD DISTRICT

EDUCATION

As cited earlier, Viscount de Melun described, in shocking detail, the physical, social, spiritual, and moral misery of the inhabitants of the Mouffetard district in the years following the Revolution of 1789.¹⁴³ Since it was the area in which Sister Rosalie spent her entire adult life, it would be good to situate it within the French capital of her era, with its extremes of luxury and destitution sometimes within a few short blocks of one another. Such was the Mouffetard district with its indigence and its nearby neighbor, the Saint-Germain quarter, with its opulence.

A tourist in Paris today is hardly likely to visit this section of the XIIth arrondissement of yore. It is known variously as the Mouffetard district, because of one of its two XIVth-century streets; the Saint-Médard quarter, named for the parish church built there during the VIIIth century; or the Saint-Marcel (Saint-Marceau) district after one of its oldest streets. It is now part of the Vth arrondissement – the Latin Quarter – with the Sorbonne, Cluny Museum, Panthéon, Luxembourg Gardens, and numerous cafés and boutiques along Boulevard Saint-Michel. The Mouffetard district, as those speaking or writing about Sister Rosalie generally call it, has undergone some gentrification but it is still mostly poor. The outdoor markets on Saturday attract Parisians but few visitors.

Situated on the Left Bank, a short walk from Notre-Dame, the district had its beginnings as a small town, Saint-Médard, which grew up around the church of that name as early as the IXth century. It developed little by little, becoming a working class neighborhood that was annexed to the city of Paris in 1724. In 1789, the Revolution came with its promises of a better life for all. By the time it was over, the rich of the capital had lost most of their possessions and the poor were left poorer than before.

¹⁴³ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 30-31.



Church of Saint-Médard with market in the square.

Rue Mouffetard on the left.

Public domain

From 1802-1856, the period of Sister Rosalie's life in Paris, the population of the capital went from a little over 500,000 to nearly 2,000,000. There was a massive construction effort. It was directed, however, toward the creation of new districts. The oldest parts of the city were left to further deteriorate. The Mouffetard district was one of the most neglected.

By the time Sister Rosalie arrived there the quarter was made up, almost exclusively, of large working class families. It is important to note here, as Paul Droulers, S.J., points out in his work, *Politique sociale et christianisme*, that "in common parlance, the word 'worker' is a synonym for 'poor' and this poverty becomes misery, a lack of the strict necessities of life, the moment there is the shortest layoff from work."¹⁴⁴ The author also asserts that "until 1914 every working class family, with three or more children, was registered with the 'Bureau de bienfaisance municipal' [Bureau of Public Assistance] because it was viewed as incapable of providing for itself only on the father's wages."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Paul Droulers, S.J., *Politique sociale et christianisme* (Paris, 1969), 24-25.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Moreover, working conditions were deplorable. The work day was 12 hours or more. The going daily wage for men was 2 francs, for women, 1 franc, and for children, 50 centimes. Men frequently died young, leaving their families in complete destitution. Illness or unemployment yielded similar results.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, during Sister Rosalie's era, two revolutions, in 1830 and 1848, wreaked havoc on the quarter, bringing commerce and industry almost to a halt. And to complete the misery of the people, three cholera epidemics, one in 1832, one in 1849, and one in 1854, claimed numerous lives and left other victims debilitated.

Louis Chevalier, in his *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses*, Abbé Isidore Mullois in his *La charité et la misère à Paris*, and André Latreille, Étienne Delaruelle, Jean-Rémy Palanque and René Rémond in volume III of their *Histoire du catholicisme en France*, support this assessment. Combined with Viscount de Melun's description of the area and Sister Rosalie's own testimony, they paint a grim picture of the district in which Sister Rosalie would labor her entire adult life. In several of her letters, she describes the lives of the people that she and her companions were called upon to serve. For the most part, they were "day workers, laundresses, street cleaners, menders of clothing, heavy laborers, workers in tanning factories, rag pickers, tinkers, and wandering merchants."¹⁴⁷



Daily life in the Saint-Marcel district on rue Mouffetard.
Public domain

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Letter of Sister Rosalie to Empress Eugénie, June 1854, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le. The original of this letter has been lost; copy in the Archives of the Daughters of Charity in Paris donated by Eugène Rendu.

In a June 1840 report concerning the newly re-established Ladies of Charity addressed to Father Étienne, who was, at the time, Procurator of the Congregation of the Mission, Sister Rosalie described the living conditions of the working poor of the district. She wrote:

I believe... that I must enlighten you on the comportment and habits of those who are poor in the parish of Saint-Médard. They are numerous and have no resources in the quarter because there are no rich families. Most are caught in low-paying jobs. There are usually a number of children, so the family burden is great. They are generally very wretched. Unhealthy housing and the lack of food, even the bare necessities, often lead to disease.¹⁴⁸

Their working conditions alone would place these people among society's most vulnerable. To that must be added malnutrition, "The high cost of bread is a heavy burden which arouses strong protestation. The people are angry."¹⁴⁹

As if all this were not bad enough, extreme winter weather also added to the misery of the population. In February 1837, Sister Rosalie told her friend Cyprien Loppe, "All our poor people were ill, including the doctors. I assure you it was worse than the cholera epidemic. We have lost a number of people, and it is not over yet. The aftermath has been dreadful. The elderly are dying in great numbers as are the children."¹⁵⁰ In the same letter, Sister Rosalie informed Loppe that she and four of the sisters had also been ill. They could not, however, stop their activities on that account because those who were poor were in an even worse condition and their needs too great. Nor was the following winter any better. Once again, in a letter to Cyprien Loppe, we learn something of the extent of the devastation caused by the weather. Sister Rosalie wrote:

Providence has helped us. The resources were beyond what we had hoped for... But, how little it was when

¹⁴⁸ Report of Sister Rosalie to Jean-Baptiste Étienne, C.M., on the re-establishment of the Ladies of Charity, June 1840, Drawer 183, ACMP.

¹⁴⁹ Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mélanie Rendu, 24 May 1829, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 6.

¹⁵⁰ Letter of Sister Rosalie to Cyprien Loppe, 22 February 1837, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 36 L9.

compared to the cruel misery! We distribute 2,000 rations of soup each day... We have had enormous difficulties. Besides that, we have experienced illness because our sisters have suffered from the cold and all the rigors of the season.¹⁵¹

Again, in March 1845, Sister Rosalie spoke of the rigors of the Parisian winter. She told her cousin Mélanie:

The winter is very severe. I have never seen so much snow and ice. Our poor are constantly after us. We have 16,000 of them in our quarter. Their demands are infinite. We are all exhausted.¹⁵²

How did Sister Rosalie and the other sisters, first of the house on rue des Francs-Bourgeois-Saint-Marcel and later on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois, try to respond to these overwhelming needs? An examination of the works in which Sister Rosalie served or initiated will provide an answer to that question.

As has been pointed out earlier, Sister Rosalie began her life as a Daughter of Charity in the Maison Saint-Martin on rue des Francs-Bourgeois-Saint-Marcel. In 1819 this house was transferred to a nearby more spacious one, on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois.¹⁵³ Thus, her entire community life was spent in what was essentially one house. It had become, in the years following the Revolution of 1789, more precisely during the Consulate of Napoléon Bonaparte, a "maison de secours" (house of charity). When Sister Rosalie arrived there in 1802, it was one of four such houses of public assistance in the former XIIth arrondissement. In his biography, Melun describes this new concept designed to replace the miserable failure of the Revolution which had confiscated property, suppressed religious orders, taken over hospitals and charitable institutions, and put in their place a register called *Le Grand Livre de la bienfaisance publique*, where the names of those in need

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 18 February 1838, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 57 L15.

¹⁵² Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mélanie Rendu, 17 March 1845, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 190.

¹⁵³ Letter of the Mayor of the XIIth arrondissement to the members of the General Council for the Administration of Hospices which resulted in the house of the Daughters of Charity, called Saint Martin, on rue des Francs-Bourgeois-Saint-Marcel being transferred to a larger house in the neighborhood on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois, 22 April 1819, Archives de l'Assistance Publique Paris, cote 18. Hereinafter cited as AAPP.

were to be transcribed. Invalids, widows, orphans, and abandoned children were to receive pensions instead of alms. The responsibility for distributing them devolved on the state. They were never paid.¹⁵⁴

Napoléon's goal was to re-establish the pre-revolutionary collaboration between Church and State. Thus, he set about reorganizing the system of public assistance in hospitals and in newly created municipal bureaus of public assistance, or "bureaux de bienfaisance," for each arrondissement. The latter would also be called "bureaux de charité" (bureaus of charity) during the Restoration of the Bourbon Monarchy (1815-1831), returning to the appellation of "bureaux de bienfaisance" with the July Monarchy in 1831.¹⁵⁵ The administration was to be lay but direct service was to be carried out by the recently re-established religious congregations. State support was to be allied to more traditional forms of "charity."¹⁵⁶ It is once again from Melun that we learn of the works of the Maison Saint-Martin when Sister Rosalie arrived there:

The house on rue des Francs-Bourgeois-Saint-Marcel had been designated as one of the four "maisons de secours" [houses of charity] of the XIIth arrondissement. A pharmacy, a depository for clothing and household linens, and a free school for children who were poor were set up in it. The administrators took care of drawing up a list of indigent families. The house of charity provided each family with two pounds of bread each month, a little meat in case of illness or convalescence, a little firewood during the winter, and, every two years, a shirt or a blanket.

The sisters were responsible for the distribution of medicines, teaching school, visiting the sick, and for distributing assistance with the support of the commissioners [administrators] and the Ladies of Charity.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 37-38.

¹⁵⁵ Claude Dinnat, *Sœur Rosalie Rendu ou L'Amour à l'œuvre dans le Paris du XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 2001), 67-68.

¹⁵⁶ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 34-39.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.



Sisters informally teaching children in the Mouffetard district.
Archives, Congregation of the Mission, Paris

Sister Rosalie enthusiastically undertook her new functions: teaching little girls from poor families and visiting the sick in their homes. Let us turn our attention now to the first of these: education. We do not know the precise number of children in school during these early days. An enumeration of properties, found in the Archives of Public Assistance in Paris dated 1 January 1827, lists four schools for girls in the XIIth arrondissement, one of which was “rue de l’Épée-de-Bois, with 221 girls and two sisters.”¹⁵⁸ By contemporary standards the teacher-pupil ratio is an aberration. It was far less so in XIXth century France, particularly in the cities. Father Beaudoin points out that similar statistics are seen in recent *Positiones* on founders of religious congregations of teaching sisters in the XIXth century. It appears that classes of 100 or more were common in the cities, although the teacher frequently had one or more assistants, who were given no official recognition.¹⁵⁹

Class size alone would have prohibited an extensive curriculum, as would have the limited education of the teachers themselves. It must be remembered that, as was pointed out earlier, Sister Rosalie, herself, had very little formal education. The goal

¹⁵⁸ AAPP, cote 18.

¹⁵⁹ *Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio*, 39, note 31.

seems to have been to teach basic reading, writing, arithmetic and a great deal of catechism. Even later on, when there were more sisters in the house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois – 6 in 1828; 8 in 1829; and 12 in 1856 – this goal did not change.¹⁶⁰ Indeed, it was perceived as the only appropriate one for little girls from indigent families. In a June 1854 letter (the original of which has been lost) to Empress Eugénie, wife of Emperor Napoléon III, Sister Rosalie stated, with her usual conviction, that it was essential “to return purely and simply to the principles of former times: to teach girls [from poor backgrounds] reading, writing, their language, religion to its full extent, arithmetic, and needle work.”¹⁶¹ She saw such a pedagogical approach as “very useful for the interests of the children, for the customs of the poor, and... for society in general.”¹⁶²

This is undoubtedly the curriculum that Sister Rosalie followed during her first years as a Daughter of Charity. Later on the number of sisters and pupils would increase and Sister Rosalie would no longer teach. In 1815, at the age of twenty-nine, she became the superior of the house. Education, however, remained central to the service of those who were poor in the Mouffetard district. Her role now was one of supervision.

While the curriculum remained limited, the manner in which it was presented was to be of the highest quality. Teachers obviously needed basic knowledge of the subject matter to be taught, but they especially needed to be able to effectively communicate that knowledge to their young charges. Overworked as the teachers were, Sister Rosalie once refused the services of a young woman who wanted to teach with the Daughters of Charity because, as she told her friend, Cyprien Loppe, this woman “has only personal knowledge and does not know how to convey it to others.”¹⁶³

The sisters who observed Sister Rosalie's comportment and heard her words are in agreement on the importance she placed on the quality of the instruction given. In her testimony on Sister Rosalie's life, Sister Angélique [Euphrasie] Tissot, who had spent her first six years as a Daughter of Charity teaching school under Sister Rosalie's guidance, recalled:

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

¹⁶¹ *Letter of Sister Rosalie to Empress Eugénie*, June 1854, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Letter of Sister Rosalie to Cyprien Loppe*, 22 February 1837, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le36 L9.

Sister Rosalie insisted that we be on time and that the little rule [*Particular Rules for the Sisters in Schools*] be faithfully observed. "I insist upon this also, she told us, so that you will become accustomed to exactitude and order... Your mission is so beautiful that you must not lose a single moment in carrying it out. Remember that only you are going to teach these children to know and love God. Their mothers will not do it. Recall that you are paid to teach. You will fail in justice if you do not do your best to do it well."¹⁶⁴

According to Sister Tissot, Sister Rosalie recognized, probably from her early days in the classroom, that teaching these children, for whom school was "a trying experience" and who would "rather be doing manual work," was very difficult.¹⁶⁵ She pleaded with the sisters:

Cherish them. Be patient. You will see that they will change. Above all, Sisters, do not discourage them. Later they will feel your affection and want to please you.¹⁶⁶

Sister Costalin also speaks of the place that the education of little girls who were poor always held for Sister Rosalie, even after the other works of the house expanded. She always had time for it, visiting the school twice each day and supporting the sisters involved in this demanding apostolate. If, during these visits, she saw that a sister was tired or losing her patience with the children, she would find a discrete way to replace her for a few minutes, allowing her to recoup her energy or good humor.¹⁶⁷

Sister Rosalie's visits were marked by humility and simplicity. She quietly supervised instruction from the doorway and graciously gave any needed advice later.¹⁶⁸ She did not shy away from the unpleasant aspects of this service to children. Sister Costalin continues:

¹⁶⁴ *Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 54.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 36, 51.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

Our mother liked to pass unnoticed. She would not tolerate any distinction of persons. Nothing distinguished her to the numerous visitors to the house. She always wore a white apron like the rest of us ...and was careful to perform the most humble tasks. Almost everyday she found time to clean the toilets for the day classes.¹⁶⁹

While the classes were overcrowded, the curriculum limited, and the teachers undertrained for their task, the results seem to have been enviable. Melun tells us, albeit with his tendency to hyperbole, "Nowhere did the children read more distinctly or write more correctly. Others did not know their prayers better. Their dresses were clean, their expressions intelligent, and their countenances open."¹⁷⁰

If Sister Rosalie favored a "no frills" approach to education, she also wanted it to reach as many children as possible and to be practical. On the first point, Melun recounts that, as Sister Rosalie went about the Mouffetard district on her visits to the sick in their homes, she was ever on the lookout for little girls who were on the streets instead of in school. When she found one, "she sent for the mother, scolded her for her negligence, and explained all the advantages of a Christian education to her."¹⁷¹ If the reason the child was not in school was not neglect but rather a lack of space in public education, "Sister Rosalie would take the little one by the hand and bring her herself to the sister teaching the class." Despite the sister's protest that there was no room there either, Sister Rosalie would find a way to have the child accepted.¹⁷² To her, overcrowding was preferable to another child lost to the streets. She was forced to recognize, however, that overcrowding had its limits. Beyond a certain point in numbers no learning could be achieved, to say nothing of what such a situation would mean for those who were trying to teach. Melun tells us that to alleviate this:

Sister Rosalie, with her usual energy, went about setting up classes on [nearby] rue du Banquier. She

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷⁰ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 63.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 64.

appealed to everyone she knew to be concerned with providing a good education for those in need. She succeeded in raising the funds necessary for the work. By numerous personal contacts and by enlisting all the influence that she had at her disposition, she was able to convince the city of Paris to assume responsibility for this school. Another sisters' house was established there and three classes were opened.¹⁷³

Thus it was that little girls from poor families in this miserable area of Paris received an elementary education that would later enable them to earn a modest living and raise a Christian family. The opening of the school on rue du Banquier, and its subsequent erection as a separate house of the Daughters of Charity, is a good illustration of Sister Rosalie's ability to place the good of those in need before any personal satisfaction she might experience by starting or expanding a work. She was able to "let go" and let the seeds she had planted be harvested by others. Nevertheless her loving heart followed it from a distance, and she was always there to support and encourage. Who received the credit was unimportant to her.¹⁷⁴

Sister Rosalie saw very quickly that the education the Daughters of Charity were providing also needed to be practical. Thus it was that the *ouvroir* was opened as an adjunct to the school.

Technically speaking, an *ouvroir* was a workshop, supported by public assistance, where piecework was provided for young girls and women living in poverty to help them to earn a modest living. A workshop of this type would open at 5, rue de l'Épée-de-Bois when this building was purchased in 1843.¹⁷⁵

There is evidence, however, of an *ouvroir* for little girls at an earlier date. A listing of properties found in the Archives of Public Assistance in Paris, dated 1 January 1827, mentions four *ouvroirs* for girls in the XIIth arrondissement, one of which was "rue de l'Épée-de-Bois with 28 girls and 1 sister."¹⁷⁶ We already know that Sister Rosalie understood that some of the children found school to be a

¹⁷³ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 65; see letters of Sister Rosalie Rendu to Madame Badin, AFCP, 28 August 1848, 8J2 - Ro - Le 217 B2; 3 October 1848, Le 222 B6; 7 December 1848, Le 225 B8; 15 November 1849, Le 233 B13; 3 November 1850, Le 246 B17.

¹⁷⁴ Desmet, *Sœur Rosalie*, 131-132.

¹⁷⁵ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, *Positio*, 41.

¹⁷⁶ AAPP, cote 18.

"trying experience," and that they would "rather be doing manual work." They were also frequently among the least gifted and most troublesome. So it was that, according to Sister Tissot, as soon as she was able to do so, Sister Rosalie selected some of these children from the various classes and confided them to an experienced, successful teacher, in this case Sister Augustine Chassaigne, to whom she gave the following instructions:

You will render great service to our sisters and to these poor children... You will teach them reading, writing, and arithmetic. You will get what you can from them. Let your little lessons be directed especially to leading them to love our good God. Sometimes they lack motivation as much as intelligence. They do not want to learn anything and end up being scolded. With you they will do a little less studying and a little more sewing. That will be better for them and will motivate them.¹⁷⁷

The endeavor was successful. It was soon expanded to other girls and would eventually evolve into an *ouvroir*, properly so-called. The approach described here, however, dates from 1827, well before the arrival of Sister Chassaigne, who did not come to rue de l'Épée-de-Bois until 1842.¹⁷⁸ Very early on, then, Sister Rosalie reached out to children who struggled with the regular curriculum and provided an education for them that was more in keeping with their interests and needs. In this she was following the Vincentian tradition in the education of children who were poor, first developed by the foundress, Saint Louise de Marillac. In the XVIIth century, Louise had combined reading, writing, and arithmetic with practical training and religious instruction first, for little country girls and, later, for city children, all of whom were poor.

The era was different but Sister Rosalie, like Saint Louise, implemented the Core Values of Vincentian Education by insuring for her young charges a formation that was holistic, integrated, creative, flexible, excellent, person oriented, collaborative, and focused.¹⁷⁹ The

¹⁷⁷ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 55.

¹⁷⁸ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio*, 41.

¹⁷⁹ Louise Sullivan, D.C., *The Core Values of Vincentian Education* (New York: Niagara University, 1995), 28.

process began for her when she entered the classroom for the first time as a novice. It would continue all her life, thus ensuring for many in the Mouffetard district an education capable of helping them to become better, more self-sufficient persons with a solid foundation in their faith.

Now let us examine the other major service of those who were poor in which Sister Rosalie was involved from her earliest years with the Daughters of Charity, namely, the service of the sick poor in their homes. This had been the initial work of the Company and would be a central focus of Sister Rosalie's apostolic zeal throughout her life.



Present day street sign indicating rue Mouffetard.
Public domain